

Denver Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

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Denver Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

The 59th annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers was held September 1-5, 1963, at the sumptuous Denver-Hilton Hotel in Denver, Colorado. The host institution was the University of Denver ; and the local arrangements for the massive meeting, under the general chairmanship of Professor Clark N. Crain, were executed in a most efficient manner.

Attendance

The mushrooming size of the Association, and especially of its annual meeting, is indicated by the impressive attendance of approximately 800. The American meeting, in contrast with the Canadian meeting, is nowadays almost never held on a university campus because few universities have facilities to accommodate such a large group. The meeting on the campus of Michigan State University two years ago, where the attendance was about 600, was an exception.

The participants at Denver happily included a surprisingly large number of Canadians. All provinces were represented except the Maritimes and Newfoundland. Departments which were especially heavily represented included McGill, Toronto, Alberta (both Edmonton and Calgary) and British Columbia. The writer had the good fortune to be able to participate at this meeting and the honor to represent l'Université Laval.

Presentation of Papers

The gigantic size of the American meeting is further emphasized by the large volume of papers presented at Denver, approximately 180. In many cases four sessions were in progress concurrently. The program, which included abstracts of the papers, was a 160-page volume distributed to participants at registration. Hearty congratulations are due to those responsible for the publication of this impressive volume.

The opening ceremony, the first of three evening plenary sessions, was devoted principally to two papers on Denver and Colorado by Clark N. Crain and John G. Welles (both of the University of Denver), respectively. The President's plenary session, arranged by President Arch C. Gerlach, was devoted to the subject *New Approaches to the Geography of the United States*. Speakers were Brian J. L. Berry (University of Chicago), Edwin H. Hammond (University of Wisconsin), and George H. T. Kimble (Twentieth Century Fund). Mr. Kimble reported on a new book, a geography of the United States for the intelligent layman, now in preparation for the Twentieth Century Fund. The third plenary session was a movie, *The Well of Sacrifice*, presented by the National Geographic Society.

The 14 other invited sessions were of three types : (1) those sponsored by A.A.G. committees, (2) those concerned with the geography of the host region, and (3) those treating subjects of broad interest ranging from political, economic and regional geography to geographical journals and new avenues for research.

If the two plenary sessions which consisted of the presentation of papers are added to the 14 invited sessions just mentioned, it is clear that there were 16 sessions of invited papers. By contrast, the voluntarily submitted papers constituted 19 sessions. The writer hopes that this high proportion of invited papers is not the beginning of a trend.

Contrary to the pronouncement of the Program Committee (*Program*, p. 4), the subjects of the volunteered papers accepted do *not* necessarily indicate « the fields of research that are currently of greatest interest to American geographers. » The 19 sections were « designated in advance of the receipt of papers » (*Professional Geographer* XV (3) : 19. May, 1963). Here is what this means. Suppose, on the one hand, that 20 exceptionally good papers were submitted on agricultural geography. Only 6 of those would be accepted because only one session was allowed on this subject. On the other hand, if only 3 papers were received on Asia, all would probably be accepted, even if mediocre, because a session on Asia had been prearranged. The writer is squarely opposed to this practice even if eliminating it would necessitate an even earlier submission of papers.

In contrast with the practice at other recent meetings, formal discussants performed in only a few of this year's sessions of volunteered papers. Does this mean that the vogue of calculated, sometimes vicious criticism is perhaps subsiding?

A Regional Theme ?

The writer was disappointed that more was not made of the would-be Denver – Rocky Mountain theme which never quite materialized. In so far as the theme emerged, it expressed an over-identification of Denver with the Rockies. After all, Denver is located on the Great Plains — or, from a broader point of view, on the boundary between the Great Plains and the Rockies — and a major portion of its hinterland is in the central Great Plains.

National meetings are rarely held in the West, and going to Denver should be an unforgettable experience for most North American geographers.

Numerous papers on the Rockies and the Great Plains were presented and others could easily have been solicited. These could have been grouped in such a way as to emphasize a Denver – Rocky Mountain – Great Plains theme. Instead, they were for the most part scattered through the program under diverse headings, such as agricultural geography, historical geography, and Anglo-America. The most evident examples of the papers in question are listed below. This list will not only serve to make the point but will also give some indication of the kind of research being done on the Great Plains and the Rockies :

BEATY, Chester B. (Montana State Univ.) — *Slope Development on Jumbo Mountain, Western Montana.*

CRAIN, Clark N. (Univ. of Denver) — *Denver : a Study in Metropolitan Frustration.*

CROWLEY, John M. (Université Laval) — *Livestock Ranching in the Mountain Parks of Colorado.*
de la MONTAGNE, John (Montana State Coll.) — *Geography and Provenance for Pre-Wisconsin Piedmont Ice in Three Valleys adjacent to Yellowstone Park.*

FRIIS, Herman R. (U. S. National Archives) — *Highlights of the History of Geographical Exploration of the Great Plains and Rocky Mountain Front by the United States Government Prior to 1875.*

FROST, Melvin J. (Univ. of Florida) — *Recent Homesteading in San Juan County, (southeastern) Utah.*

HEROLD, Laurance C. (Univ. of Denver) — *Prehistoric Settlements along the Rio Grande de Ranchos, (north central) New Mexico.*

HEWES, Leslie (Univ. of Nebraska) — *Suitcase Farming as a Type of Land Settlement in the Dust Bowl.*

HOFFMEISTER, Harold A. (Univ. of Colorado) — *Changing Patterns in the Geography of Leadville, Colorado.*

JACKSON, John B. (Editor, *Landscape*) — *The Rise and Fall of Tourism in Colorado.*

LEWIS, J. Malcom (Univ. of Denver) — *The Birth and Development of the Great Plains Concept.*

- LÖEFFLER, M. John (Univ. of Colorado) — *Population Geography of the Colorado Piedmont: a Survey.*
- MEINIG, Donald W. (Syracuse Univ.) — *Colorado as an Historical Settlement Region.*
- MOORE, John C. (Eastern Michigan Univ.) — *The Colorado River and Geographic Thought.*
- OSBORNE, William S. (Univ. of Colorado) — *Factors Involved in Modifying Several Types of Alpine Mass Waste Features (Front Ranges).*
- RICHMOND, Gerald M. (U. S. Geol. Survey) — *High Level Erosion Surfaces in the Rocky Mountains — their Age and Origin.*
- TRINDELL, Roger T. (Millersville Pennsylvania State Coll.) — *Historical Geography of Pueblo, Colorado.*
- WELLES, John G. (Univ. of Denver) — *Wandering through Colorado with a Shotgun.*

Banquet and Presentation of Awards

The traditional Annual Banquet culminated the meeting. It consisted, as in the past, of three principal parts: a grandiose meal in friendly company, the presentation of awards, and the address of the Honorary President.

The address of Honorary President Edward A. Ackerman, « Where is a Research Frontier? » will be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.

The recipients of the annual awards and the citations read at the banquet were as follows:

Outstanding Achievement Award to: Gilbert H. Grosvenor, for more than half a century of successful leadership in the broadening of public appreciation for geography through tremendous growth in circulation of the *National Geographic Magazine* with its superb illustrations, the production of consistently superior maps, and the support of numerous scientific expeditions and research projects.

Citation for Meritorious Contribution to the Field of Geography to: John B. Jackson, for his initiative in conceiving, and in publishing almost singlehandedly an original and vigorous journal — *Landscape* — which brings to bear on the human environment both esthetics and geography.

Dan Stanislawski (Univ. of Arizona), for his perceptive, sensitive, and informed studies-in-depth of the Portuguese people in their physical and cultural setting.

Merle C. Prunty, Jr. (Univ. of Georgia), for his consistently excellent analyses of the dynamic processes that underly changing land occupance in the southern United States.

Field Trips

The field trips held in conjunction with the Denver meeting seemed to be calculated to surpass those of preceeding meetings. An impressive selection of five major excursions was offered:

The *Southwestern Colorado Trip* was a 3-day excursion which included South Park, the San Juan Mountains, the San Juan Basin, Mesa Verde, the San Luis Valley, and the southern Colorado Piedmont.

Participants on the *Piedmont and Front Range Trip* examined the agricultural geography of the Piedmont in the vicinity of Denver and Boulder and physiography and historic mining centers in the adjacent Front Range.

The trip to the *Tundra Station of the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research* of the University of Colorado emphasized alpine climatology and ecology.

The *Metropolitan Denver Trip* considered site, location and function in the Denver metropolitan area.

The *Air Force Academy Tour* consisted of a visit to the architecturally audacious new U. S. Air Force Academy near Colorado Springs.

1964 Meeting of the A. A. G.

The next meeting of the Association will be held in Syracuse, New York, March 29 – April 2, 1964 (*Professional Geographer* XV (4) : 30, 38. July, 1963).

Implications for the Canadian Association of Geographers

Size of the National Meeting. The annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers is bigger, to be sure, than that of the Canadian Association of Geographers although, interestingly enough, not quite ten times as big as one would expect from the relative populations of the two countries. As Canadians we may be impressed by the gigantic size of the American meeting with its hundreds of participants, dozens of papers, and several field trips.

We should not be misled, however, into assuming that it is better because it is bigger. Both the Canadian and the American meetings generally have a few exceptionally good papers and some extremely poor ones. Regardless of the greater choice at the American meeting, one can attend only one paper at a time and the average participant doesn't go on more than one or two field trips.

The greatest advantage of the Canadian meeting reposes, in fact, in its smaller size. At a Canadian meeting one can meet and chat with a large proportion of the other geographers there. In the crowd of the American meeting this is obviously out of the question. From this point of view the Canadian meeting, in my opinion, is much more gratifying than its American counterpart. In other words, we are fortunate that our meeting is still small !

Cost of Participation. It is unquestionably more expensive to attend an American meeting than a Canadian meeting, transportation costs disregarded. The A. A. G. meeting is longer and is generally held in the downtown section of a large city where lodging and parking are expensive. In addition, the registration fee at the A. A. G. meeting is generally \$4.50 – \$5.00, that at the C. A. G. meeting, nothing ; the A. A. G. banquet commonly costs \$6.00, the C. A. G. banquet, \$4.50 – \$5.00. A. A. G. field trips are accordingly more expensive. Keeping the cost of participation at the meeting and on the field trips at the lowest possible level is an achievement of which we can be proud and which we should make a considerable effort to maintain.

Learning from the Mistakes of the A. A. G. Because the American association is older and larger than our own, it has generally already encountered many of the problems that our association is just discovering. I do not think it is moving toward americanization to avoid making the same mistakes they have made.

Among the most important lessons to be learned from the A. A. G. meetings is that, as the annual meeting becomes larger and more unmanageable, more and much earlier planning is necessary. A case in point is the deadline for submission of papers. A superb illustration is afforded by the sequence of events preceeding the Laval C. A. G. meeting last spring. The deadline for *abstracts* for the May meeting of the C. A. G. was *later* than that for *full texts* for the A. A. G. meeting to be held the following September ! The C. A. G. must rid itself of this last-minute method of doing things.

Another procedure necessitated by the expanding size of our national meeting is the sharing of the work of preparing the meeting. The American meeting has long since passed the point where a single department of geography can handle the preparations, and our Canadian meeting is approaching this point. A division of labor — not necessarily patterned after the A. A. G. model, but nevertheless a division — is warranted to relieve the host department of some of the pressure.

The Dilemma Concerning Discussants. Neither the A.A.G. nor the C.A.G. seems satisfied either with or without formal discussants, at least for the volunteered papers.

On the one hand, for most invited discussants « to discuss » means « to criticize. » According to my experience at both American and Canadian meetings, most discussants fall into one of two groups. In one group is the premeditated critic who feels himself called upon not only to demolish the paper but also in some cases to attack the author personally. Important results of this type of prepared criticism are that : (1) the good and bad papers alike are subject to a torrent of attack ; and (2) some in our profession are drifting towards an attitude of antagonism, rather than tolerance, towards their fellow workers. The second group is composed of the « discussants » who do not deal at all with the paper but instead present *another* paper englobing their opposing views. This fellow often rambles on longer than the author of the paper itself. The situation is made the more ridiculous by the fact that few session chairmen have the gall to stop him.

On the other hand, should we let the really mediocre papers get by without severe criticism ? The very weak paper often leaves the audience so stupefied that even the most provocative person does not raise points of disagreement. In contrast, the kind of sharp sequence of question and retort that frequently follows a really interesting and penetrating paper in spontaneous discussion may seem to the uninitiated to be critical of the paper.

I must frankly confess that I am divided on the discussant issue. I would be in favor of the prearranged discussant if he would keep in mind that his duty is to *discuss* the paper and not necessarily to *criticize* it. In many cases his obligation may be, on the contrary, to *compliment* the paper.

Student Participation. At American meetings a considerable number of the registrants are graduate students, and much of the conversation in graduate departments for weeks afterwards is often about controversial issues raised at the meeting and the famous geographers that one saw there. At Canadian meetings it seems that about the only student participants are those of the host department. I certainly believe that graduate students should be encouraged from an early date to attend national, and especially regional, geographical meetings.¹ Furthermore, I think that at the meeting their professors should make a special effort to introduce them to the elders and leaders in the field. The lifelong benefits that are often derived from contacts made at geographical meetings are most important.

A Regional Theme. I have pointed out how the Denver meeting fell short, in my opinion, of achieving a regional theme ; and I have shown some of the papers could have been grouped to bring out the character of the host city and area. Going to Denver, Atlanta, Toronto, or Vancouver is an effort into which we invest a considerable amount of our time and money. Such a trip could be an experience never to be forgotten. Why should an A.A.G. meeting in Chicago be almost exactly like one in Dallas, or a C.A.G. meeting in Montreal identical to one in Winnipeg. Let's give our meetings a regional flavor which will make them more enjoyable, more rewarding, and more memorable.

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¹ See in this regard : GAULT, Thomas G. « Field Trips to Professional Meetings for Geography Majors. » *Journal of Geography*, vol. LXII, No. 7, 1963, pp. 297-300.